OPINION

BY F.S. AIJAZUDDIN

A prince's piety

PIETY, not punctuality, is the politeness of princes. And none was more pious than the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh (1615-1659). As the eldest son of the emperor Shah Jahan, Dara Shikoh should have succeeded his father. However, Dara's younger brother Muhi al-Din Muhammad (later the emperor Aurangzeb) practised his own version of piety. His flexible orthodoxy allowed him to imprison his father in 1658 and a year later have his brother Dara Shikoh executed.

The Timurid dynasty that ruled India from 1526 until 1857 produced a run of aesthetically inclined rulers, starting with the candid memoirist Babar to the introspective poet Bahadur Shah Zafar. In between them, Akbar ordered Persian translations of the Hindu epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In time, his great-grandson Dara Shikoh translated the *Upanishads* (as *Sirr-i-Akbar* or the 'Greatest Mystery'), the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Yoga Vasistha* (a fifth-century Hindu text).

The definition in the *Vasistha* of a *jivanmukta* or liberated person fits Dara Shikoh: he personified "nobleness, benevolence, love, clearness of intellect". Dara Shikoh's "clearness of intellect" persuaded him to write his *Majma-ul-Bahrain* or 'The Mingling of the Two Oceans', a Sufi text on the unity he found in Islam, Hinduism and other religions.

Unusually for a Mughal prince, Dara Shikoh remained monogamous. His singular love was his "dearest intimate friend" Nadirah Banu Begum, the cousin he married in 1633. Some years later, he gave her an album containing paintings and calligraphy, which he had commissioned earlier. It survived centuries of hazards. It was auctioned in 1908 and is now in the British Library.

In the mid-1970s, I was privileged to handle it and admire its precious contents, courtesy its keeper Dr Mildred Archer. In 1981, she and Toby Falk catalogued the album's 68 miniature paintings and 72 folios of calligraphy. Their catalogue entries were useful but brief. For example, for folio 18, they wrote: "A young prince kneels before a *mulla* who holds a book on which is written the two opening *baits* of a *ghazal* by Hafiz." But who was the prince? And who was his bearded preceptor?

Murad Khan Mumtaz has re-examined the Dara Shikoh album and in his recent treatise *Faces of God: Images of Devotion in Indo-Muslim Painting, 1500-1800*, he reveals the deeper meanings within it. He explains that it is more than just a paean to conjugal love, like the marble sepulchre built by his father Shah Jahan for his wife Mumtaz Mahal (Dara's mother). The album is not a random collection of favourite images. Dara Shikoh's album in fact lauds the adolescent figures "as symbols of beauty" and the mullahs as Sufi divines.

In some, the figure is modelled on Dara Shikoh himself, in dialogue with his Sufi master. Evidence from this and similar imperial albums suggests that "God's self-disclosure is deliberately represented in the person of the young prince". Other albums contain reliable portraits of Sufi preceptors like Miyan Mir and Mulla Shah, who influenced the spiritual development of both Dara Shikoh and his sister Jahanara. (Incidentally, Nadirah Begam died in Sindh. Her body was brought to Lahore and buried in the precincts of the tomb of Miyan Mir.)

In his introduction to the album, Dara Shikoh praises "the master-artist of His [God's] power who decorated the page … with golden lines/ borders [calligraphy], and the designer of His handicraft who fashioned the side-faced/ half-faced moon into a portrait". In that one sentence, Dara explains a convention observed by miniature artists of every school over the centuries — of painting faces in profile. Very rarely, the artists would attempt a three-quarter or a full-face view. But the third dimension eluded them until they learned Western-style perspective.

> Murad Khan's book exercises the mind at different depths.

The placement of miniatures and calligraphy within the album is deliberate. In a quotation Murad explains: "Each folio is a complete whole, a world; within the album one folio is not joined chronologically to the next[.] From one folio to the next, the same tonalities are amplified on extended registers, calling forth magical correspondences at every level." Not dissimilar, Murad notes, to a *raga* or a *ghazal*. The album becomes in effect "a visual *ghazal*".

Reading Murad Khan's book is to exercise one's mind at different levels, at different depths. It is, to use his simile, like looking at a garden through a screen. If one concentrates on the screen, the garden is a blur. If one ignores the screen, the garden comes into focus. "It is what al-Arabi famously called 'seeing with both eyes — the eye of *tashbih* (similitude) and the eye of *tanzih* (transcendence)'."

In an age of princely impieties and presidential transgressions, such spiritual guidance is all the more precious nowadays — for rulers as for the common man. ■

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BY ANJUM ALTAF

'R' is for revision

EVER since I wrote about the vision statements of our leading institutions of higher education ("'V' is for vision', *Dawn*, Sept 21, 2025), I have been thinking of what ought to replace them. The notion of vision needs clarity. Instead of delineating a direction for the future most vision statements, for example, that students serve humanity or fight for justice, enunciate noble wishes. Such unfulfilled wishes point to conceptual problems that need diagnosis and redressal.

It helps to distinguish between an objective, a vision, and a wish. This can be illustrated with reference to the country. In the 1940s, there was an objective — creation of a new nation-state. Its vision — whether it would be a religious or a secular state — was unclear from the beginning (hence the later costs). The wish (elusive to this day) was that all citizens of the new state would consider themselves Pakistanis first.

The same template applies to educational institutions. Suppose City B lacks a business school like the one in City A. This yields an objective — setting up a business school in City B. Next, this school needs a vision — for example, should it be a carbon copy of the one in City A or something radically different; standalone or interdisciplinary; research or teaching focused; English or Urdu medium; for the poor or the rich? There are no right or wrong choices but clearly the vision matters in terms of a whole host of consequences — nature of student body, type of faculty, curriculum, expansion path, etc.

It follows that the institutional visions reflect and reinforce aspirations of the students attracted. Privileged students paying high fees for globally oriented training in English are unlikely to want to serve in developing countries. To believe otherwise is to ignore an obvious mismatch.

The same logic holds if the objective is to set up an arts institute. The institutional vision entails deciding, among other things, whether the focus would be on indigenous traditions or on global trends or some combination thereof. The choice will manifest itself, for example, in whether a local master craftsperson is accorded the same recognition as a lecturer with a foreign qualification.

The key takeaway is that the choice of vision is of crucial importance but at the institutional level; that conscious choice has a bearing on the nature of the student body, type of faculty, and curricula. In its absence, a wish for what graduates ought to do exists in a vacuum. More so because the latter is a function of many other factors not in control of institutions — parental pressures, the job market, security conditions, respect for merit, tolerance of dissent, etc.

Institutions of higher learning train students for various professions — doctors, architects, etc — which is a valid part of their mandate. But they also need to 'educate' students so that the latter are able to think for themselves, to understand the society to which they belong, and to question the legitimacy, fairness and morality of their world. Only then can one hope that they might choose to do what institutions wish them to. Even then it is only a hope.

For this, educators need to extend their concerns beyond institutions of higher learning — they need to lobby for better school education that feeds their institutions. If school education strangulates independent thinking no amount of college education can reverse the damage. It is equally important to accept that student attitudes and aspirations are shaped by what they see around them not what they are told in class — decades of ever-expanding religious studies should disabuse us of that delusion.

> Choice of vision is crucial at the institutional level.

And if institutions teach only in English and rely on high fees, they have a self-selected combination — privileged, mostly culturally isolated students facilitated to emigrate at the earliest opportunity. The lament that visions remain unfulfilled because skilled students (especially males) wish to leave the country is, once again, oblivious to the contradiction between structural choices and desired outcomes.

What is needed after decent school education is public funding of institutions of higher learning to ensure that at least half the student body is comprised of smart students otherwise kept out by language or money. Such a class mix would trigger manifold positive changes in cultural outlooks, social integration, and mutual understanding among students and in the alignment of institutions with the needs of the places where they are located.

An explicit institutional vision that spells out who and what an institution is for must precede a listing of what students ought to do. Its absence is a leading cause of why institutions have failed to deliver on the wishes they have articulated. It is time for a revision. ■

The writer is the author of What We Get Wrong About Education in Pakistan.

FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

India arming Afghanistan

RAWALPINDI: Indian Foreign Minister Y.B. Chavan has disclosed that India is assisting Afghanistan to attain parity with Pakistan in arms and military hardware. According to a report broadcast by All India Radio on Nov. 10, Mr Chavan said, on his return to New Delhi from Kabul that under the guidance of India, Afghanistan has attained equality with Pakistan in armaments. The Indian Foreign Minister added, however, that the intention of Afghanistan remains to "peacefully settle the differences" with Pakistan. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from the UN,] China … asked nuclear powers to undertake the unequivocal obligation that they will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries and nuclear-free zones… . Speaking in the disarmament debate in the first Committee, Chinese Ambassador Huang Hua said his country had consistently stood for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. China is in favour of real disarmament and not phoney disarmament. We are opposed to the Super Power fraud of sham disarmament, he said… . Meanwhile, it had supported the countries concerned in their efforts for establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones.

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Bharat 'surprised'

NEW DELHI: The Bharati Government have been "surprised" by the news of the armed raids into the Nepalese territory in which Nepalese nationals from both sides of the Bharat-Nepalese border took part… . Bharat has announced … police measures at Raxaul — Bharat-Nepalese border town in Bihar state — to prevent use of the Bharati territory for further armed operations against the Himalayan princely kingdom. Referring to the capture of Birganj ... a Press note of the Bharati Foreign Office today [Nov 12] said: "Reports of armed attack on the Governor of Birganj by Nepalese nationals, acting under the authority of the Nepalese Congress, were received by the Chief Minister of Bihar... .

"The Ambassador told the Chief Minister that the Governor of Birganj has been captured by the assailants and asked that the Bihar Government should give him protection.

"The Deputy Inspector-General of Police was immediately sent to Raxaul, which is in the Bharati territory. There he found Birganj Governor and his family, and sent them to Muzaffarpur, where accommodation was provided for them in the Circuit House." — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

A complex political ecosystem in region

AJIT Doval, India's powerful national security adviser and one of the most influential figures in shaping New Delhi's strategic thinking, recently remarked that the recent political upheavals in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka had their roots in fragile administrative structures and weak political institutions. At first glance, his statement might seem like a detached geopolitical analysis of a seasoned intelligence officer commenting on the fragility of his neighbourhood. However, if India truly applies that same lens of analysis to itself, Doval's comment transforms from an observation into a subtle act of self-critique because in South Asia's complex political ecosystem, no country operates in isolation. Each nation's internal stability or instability is shaped, at least to some extent, by its neighbours' policies, alliances and ambitions.

South Asia remains one of the most politically volatile regions in the world, with people often perceiving the state not as a protector, but as a distant power structure aligned with the political elite. Having said that, governance failure in South Asia cannot be explained solely through internal shortcomings. The region's interdependence has a lot to do with this. India, by virtue of its size and influence, often plays a decisive role in shaping the political environment around it.

India's role is uniquely consequential because it aspires to lead South Asia as the largest democracy and the most influential economic power. But leadership entails moral responsibility. When India selectively champions democracy abroad while accommodating authoritarian tendencies among friendly regimes, it sends, at best, mixed signals.

If India is genuinely seeking to be the 'protector' of peace and stability in South Asia, its foreign policy must evolve beyond transactional pragmatism. True stability cannot be built on suppression or political monopolisation. It arises from participatory governance, transparency and respect for its neighbours.

India's diplomacy needs a shift from influence-based engagement to principle-based partnership. Supporting a government simply because it aligns with short-term strategic goals may yield temporary benefits, but it undermines India's soft power and moral authority. On the other hand, supporting democratic processes even when outcomes seem uncertain strengthens India's image as a trustworthy and ethical regional power.

Bangladesh's experience carries an essential lesson: no government can indefinitely survive on external validation once it loses the trust of its people. External support, instead of stabilising such a government, often deepens its alienation from the people. When political change finally comes, the supporting power faces diplomatic embarrassment and reputational damage.

As far as India is concerned, this is a moment for self-reflection. Does New Delhi wish to be a true champion of democratic ideals in the region, or merely a beneficiary of power-centric politics? Doval was right when he said that weak governance leads to the fall of governments. But in South Asia, the story does not end there. The weakness of governance is often nurtured not just by internal actors, but also by those external powers that find short-term comfort in maintaining the status quo. New Delhi would do well to remember that in the volatile geography of South Asia, a neighbour's turmoil is never a distant fire.

Shahidul Alam Swapan
Geneva, Switzerland

Low voter turnout

DESPITE the dazzling diversity and democratic vibrancy of New York City (NYC), the mayoral election revealed a paradox at the heart of American democracy. The bustling and dynamic city, long known for civic awareness and rights had approximately 5.1 million registered voters, but only 2.05 million cast their ballots. The turnout stood at a modest 39 per cent. And this year, as Hillary Clinton noted, "more people voted in New York's election than they have in 50 years".

Even in a city celebrated for its political engagement, such low turnouts expose a widening disconnect between leadership and the people. It signals a growing truth: in both developed and developing democracies, disillusionment and fatigue are weakening the bond between the citizens and the state.

Pakistan is no exception. The February 2024 general elections recorded a turnout of less than 50pc — similar to 51pc in 2018 and 55.02pc in 2013. Half of Pakistan's electorate stays away from voting. Low participation weakens democracy's very foundation. Turnout is not just data; it is the heartbeat of a political system.

Reports from recent municipal elections and by-polls confirm the persistence of apathy. Studies and media reports show that youth participation is declining, and is far below the national average. This is alarming, considering the youth happens to be the largest demographic group. Distrust in institutions and the perception that elections bring no real change have alienated many from the process.

Every uncast vote is a lost voice. People must be made aware that their ballot creates governments, shapes laws, and determines priorities. Reinvigorating civic faith requires not just periodic drives, but a continuous dialogue between the rulers and the ruled. The survival of democracy's depends not merely on elections, but ensuring participation that reflects the collective will of the people. The soul of democracy lies in the belief that every citizen's voice does matter — and that silence, howsoever eloquent, can never substitute participation.

Qamer Soomro,
Shikarpur

Outrage sells

WHEN the trailer for the recently launched reality dating show dropped, it was clear that controversy was part of the plan. Marketed as Pakistan's first reality dating show, it promised something bold and new. What it delivered, instead, was a noisy cultural collision, a borrowed idea repackaged for shock value.

Adapted from international formats, the show places men and women together in a villa to 'find love'. For a society like ours, where the idea of public intimacy still invites scrutiny, this was bound to provoke outrage. And perhaps that was the whole point. In today's media economy, outrage sells.

But was the show ever really necessary? Pakistan does not need imported controversies to appear modern. What our entertainment industry needs are stories that mirror our evolving values, not mimic someone else's chaos. Instead of challenging stereotypes, the TV show reinforces the notion that modernity means moral rebellion, that freedom often comes wrapped in spectacle.

While the creators may call it creative experimentation, it feels more like calculated provocation, a reminder that visibility often outweighs value in modern media landscape. The show has made people talk, yes, but about the wrong things. At a time when storytelling could be a force for empathy, we have chosen to focus on love as a contest. It is not progress; it is just performance.

Tooba Tariq
Karachi

Afghan beekeepers

PAKISTAN has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for a long time. Over time, many of these refugees turned to self-employment and private enterprises. Among the most significant sectors they entered was apiculture, or beekeeping. Today, they dominate the sector across all dimensions, including production, marketing, trade and even export. The Afghan beekeepers and their parents were trained by refugee agencies and charities decades ago. A large part of Pakistan's edible honey, and most of its fruit orchards, today depends on the steady hands and management skills of these beekeepers.

The current repatriation policy poses a significant danger to the country's apiculture sector. The policy covers the repatriation of all Afghan nationals, including those with official registration cards. The local knowledge of when and how to harvest, or how to manage pests, cannot be replaced overnight. An abrupt exodus would spell doom for the honey industry. Output may reduce and prices may soar. Thousands of hives might be left unattended in remote mountain villages. Small fruit and vegetable crops may also

suffer due to the decline in bee pollination. The thriving apiculture industry might be on the edge of bankruptcy. Thus, a policy intended to enhance national security may end up compromising a rural sector that has flourished due to refugees.

This potential crisis can be prevented by policymakers without overhauling the entire refugee policy. For example, Pakistan could design special arrangements for skilled agricultural workers by providing business visas or seasonal work permits to well-trained Afghan beekeepers. Another strategy would be to promote cooperation with other countries. A third step could be to officially include refugee beekeeping within national agricultural plans. These and such other measures would be cost-effective and protect livelihoods.

Hameed Ullah
Islamabad

▶ **BLIND TURN:** Abdul Ghani, a three-year-old boy, was travelling with his parents on a two-wheeler when a motorcycle rickshaw took a blind turn and crashed into them. The child suffered severe head injuries and subsequently lost his life. Across Lahore, reckless rickshaw drivers often perform such stunts without shame. Their overloaded, poorly built, and often unregistered vehicles leave them literally blind, unable to see sideways or behind. These drivers do not use side mirrors, indicators or give caution, turning ordinary roads into death traps. How many more lives must be lost before the authorities act decisively to ensure that our roads are governed not by chaos, but by care?
Dr Nasir Javed
Lahore

▶ **AIR QUALITY:** Smog has become an annual nightmare for the people of Punjab, especially those living in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Each winter, the haze thickens, visibility drops, and respiratory illnesses increase. Yet, once the season passes, all preventive efforts are forgotten until the next wave. The unchecked smoke from vehicles, factories and brick kilns is turning the twin cities into health hazards. The authorities must impose strict emission standards, encourage tree plantation, and promote cleaner fuels. People, too, must play their part by reducing unnecessary use of vehicles and avoiding waste burning. Air pollution is not just an environmental concern anymore; it is a public health emergency. Immediate action is needed before our cities become unliveable.
Usman Haider
Islamabad

▶ **HIGH SCHOOL:** The Government Girls Lower Secondary School (GGLSS) Agrovil Colony in Badin needs to be upgraded to the level of a high school. The absence of a girls' high school in the area creates serious hurdles for students wishing to continue their education beyond grade VIII. It restricts academic growth and discourages families from allowing their daughters to pursue further studies. The relevant authorities should take prompt action to upgrade the status of the school.
Aftab Khaskheli
Badin

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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